SciVerse ScienceDirect

Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 30 (2011) 1788 – 1794

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

WCPCG-2011

Journaling and the Creative Writing Workshop in Counseling and Recovery of Adult Participants

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Abstract

Background. I discuss a method of facilitation that I have used in my Creative Writing courses at the University of Lethbridge for many years. I tend to focus primarily on potentials and possibilities in third-year courses and then move on to questions of forms, genre, and structure in the "Advanced" or exit-year courses. These courses rely heavily on rapport and a specific structure which has the effect (most of the time) of opening the spigot of the students' creative energies. Purpose of Study. Data from this pedagogy is plotted in a qualitative exploration using in-depth phenomenological "prompts" or thought experiments. This data will be presented in order to depict how art making or (in this case, Creative Writing journaling) contributes to mental health recovery and stability. The hope of our team is that this method may be deploy at a downtown satellite program open to street people and all and any who seek help. Sources of Evidence. An interpretative phenomenological approach is applied to data collected in several years of Creative Writing workshops at the University of Lethbridge. This data is broken down into three main categories: explanatory models of how the skills, qualities and approaches of the facilitator assisted recovery, on transformative characteristics of art making in this particular venue, and the wider social benefits of such art making. Main Argument. Using collaborative techniques grounded on the premise that the workshop is unconditionally a "safe place," a progressive conversation is established in which the matter of the self is drawn into both language that is fresh and control of language that holistically conforms to the group dynamic. In this dynamic, remarkable recoveries may take place. I will focus the discussion on the structure of the collaborative journalizing, the purpose of which is to bring structure into the very production of personal and creative recovery. The journaling is an extended process-meditation, begun on the first day of a half-semester course and finished on the day a final portfolio is submitted for grading. I argue that the dream-journaling should have a basic structure in any case, and discuss several such schema as they have been used not only in Creative Writing but also in the community and in the literature of counselling and guidance. Conclusions. The findings provide a initial but profound exploration into art facilitators' pragmatic knowledge and wisdom related to the health and recovery benefits of art making in the area of counselling and guidance. It also explores important skills and competencies required by those facilitating art making programs in mental health recovery contexts. Such data may help to inform policy and design of health recovery programs associated with Creative Writing workshops both in the college or university setting as well as the community health unit.

Keywords: journalling, recovery, Kristeva, Lacan, Freud, Jung, archetypes, structured therapies, constructionism, writing groups, self-help groups

1. Introduction

Have you ever had a dream in which a small part of your somatic awareness consciously directs the flow of

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Selection and/or peer-review under responsibility of the 2nd World Conference on Psychology, Counselling and Guidance.
doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.10.344

events, images, and feelings? Have you ever had a dream in which you were aware of a Director somewhere deep inside you subtly calling the shots? And you are fuzzy about the distinction between the Director and the dream? Have you ever just awoken from a dream with the credits still rolling up behind your eyelids? Let us suppose that creative writing is similar to that kind of dreaming. Imagine, if you will, that the Director inside us—whom we may also understand as a Judge, or the Lacanian Father—functions not by releasing creativity but by setting checks and measures against it [1]. As Julia Kristiva has said, the Law of the Father (the Father's No) acts as a filter for the semiotic flow of imaginative (corporeal, signifying, or abject) feeling, creating a 'standing-under' of the Father in his capacity as the "guarantor of identity" [2]. If we accept these premises, then we may go further and suggest that the language that we use to catch and release the meaning of the dream is not constituted of a 'freedom of expression' or 'poetic license.' On the contrary, it is made up of traces of the Director's work. Arguing by analogy, let us posit that Creative Writing courses and teaching are also similar to that kind of dreaming, and that a constructivist pedagogy of a facilitating instructor is again similar to the Director in all of us, the traces or inscriptions of whose labor outlive the semiotic abjection, ignorance and resistance that will always be part of Creative Writing students' discourse.

I am referring in the previous sentence to research and theory that stems from the "constructivist" schemata of Piaget [3] and "constructionism" (confusingly enough), a development of the theory by such researchers such as the visionary computer scientist Seymour Papert [4] and more generally by Anita Woolfolk in her well known *Educational Psychology* series of textbooks [5]. Another example is Gagnon and Collay's practical *Constructivist Learning Design: Key Questions for Teaching to Standards*, which gets right down to such questions as tasks, seating, pacing, so forth [6]. Concerning teaching Joyce's *Ulysses* under the question of a "knowledge" that neither text nor student nor instructor may Master, Michael Patrick Gillespie has said recently:

> Contemporary pedagogical practice has come to privilege this condition, rejecting the solipsistic view that in the classroom a single voice disseminates the logos. Instead, it frankly acknowledges that the teacher simply offers one interpretation of knowledge (and the term knowledge itself has come to have a far more nebulous meaning for us than it did for previous generations), and it identifies student participation as a force contributing to and not disrupting the educational process. One finds broad theoretical direction for such a project in Bakhtin's advocacy of polyphony and Barthes's privileging of ambiguity, both of which encourage a sense of pluralism among students. [7]

These suggestions are apropos to the kind of Creative Writing classroom I will be describing below. I take up Papert's central concept that a constructivist classroom succeeds when it is working on a project in which students and teacher are engaged. Heidegger once said that "the real teacher, in fact, lets nothing else be learned than—learning" [8]. In this paper, I refer to my own experience as an instructor of Creative Writing in the tradition of theorizing one's practice that has been so influential among scholars and educators for over a quarter century. Here I am thinking of such studies as Newman's *Pedagogy, Praxis, Ulysses: Using Joyce's Text to Transform the Classroom* (from which Gillespie was quoted above) [9], Anna Leahy's *Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom: The Authority Project* [10], Anna-Karin Herbert's *The Pedagogy of Creativity* [11], and Kathleen McCormick's *The Culture of Reading and the Teaching of English* [12].

2. Discussion

I want to discuss a constructivist method of instruction that I have used for many years in my Creative Writing courses at the University of Lethbridge. In these courses, I gradually learned to take a step back from the classroom dynamic while at the same time fore-grounding what Piaget called "schemata." In purely writerly terms, seeing the course as a whole as a text in production, I began to view my labors as, in Consenstein's words, not unlike those "structures of a mathematical nature," those "artificial and mechanical procedures" that the Oulipo group posited in their first manifesto as their own inspirational supports [13]. Like the Oulipian Group (*Ouvioir de littérature potentielle*), I had come to rely on a set of constraints that operated formalistically as triggers or catalysts for both the students' writing and the generative *gestalt* of the classroom or work-shop. A formalist or constructivist defamiliarization with the object of writing (and the teaching of writing) seemed to be what I was after. Like Prospero in Shakespeare's The Tempest, I would "drown my book" (V. I. 50-57) [14]. I was prepared to forsake my lecture notes and exercises on point of view, images, metaphors, closure, tension, wordiness, telling vs. showing, etc., all the proscriptive rhetorical vocabulary of New Critical and Structuralist Creative Writing instruction.

After several frustrating years, I dreamed that my role in the workshop could be something different, perhaps analogous to the equal sign in certain multi-authored experimental works under the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E banner. As Watten has insisted (writing about "The Secret History of the Equal Sign"), Foucault's discursive formations and Kristeva's dialectic of the Father's Law and abject semiosis "provide critical terms for the relation of text and community enacted" in works that challenge any easy reconciliation between representational writing and a forward-seeking cultural poesis (46-47) [15]. I often rely on these theoreticians and Lacan in my scholarly researches. Therefore, after decades of trial and error, it is reassuring to read Herbert, in her *The Pedagogy of Creativity,* arguing recently that "Lacanian theory offers much to those of us willing to work through the theoretical jargon…to discover not only the sources of creativity in Lacanian theory, but also the usefulness of Lacanian theory to teachers who wish to understand important aspects of their classrooms" [16]. Never having been trained as a Creative Writing instructor, I learned my craft by "going where I had to go," waking slowly, as in the poem by American poet Ted Roethke [17].

I have learned to focus on potentials and possibilities in the "Introductory" course, which is offered at the tertiary level (usually in the Fall) in a semester system. Hence it is closed to freshmen and most sophomore students. The "Advanced" course is open to graduates of the "Introductory" course, but is not exclusive to them. Both courses are screened by the instructor for appropriate level of talent and creative writing experience. If the junior course is focused more on possibilities, then the "Advanced" or exit-year course is concerned more with encounters with traditional questions of form, genre, and structure. Traditional forms are not privileged, but rather act as a net or filter for energies released in the Fall semester course. Thus the over-arching pattern is 'finding something to say,' usually in the Fall, and then 'finding ways to say it,' usually in the Spring. Furthermore, the work of the 'finding' is done collaboratively. Due to the curricular limitation in my small Department of only 26 weeks of instruction split into two separate units, generic specificity is not practicable in either course. At first, this was seen as a problem; now it works, because literary genre is not privileged over other forms of writing that alter or conflate genres. Both courses rely heavily on rapport between instructor and students, and the combination of connected teaching and transformative course structure or "scaffolding" tends (most of the time) to counter effectively the narcissism and resistance that most Creative Writing students deploy against the Father's No--or the concept of education that maintains that learning is only possible in a Master and Apprentice relationship. Again, as in Roethke's "The Waking"—"We think by feeling. What is there to know?"

Using collaborative techniques grounded on the tenet that the workshop is unconditionally a "safe place," a progressive and transformative conversation is established at the outset. In this conversation, the matter of the self is drawn into both language that is fresh and control of language that holistically conforms to the group dynamic—as opposed to traditional concepts of literariness. An important part of that dynamic, of course, is the instructor. The instructor boogies with "teachable moments" that come up in each workshop, and by so doing facilitates both coverage and rapport.

The general movement in this conversation is from the inchoate forces of the semiotic, what Lacan calls the Real, to a control over language and structure made manifest by tracing the Law of the Father in a Symbolic Body constructed by the work accomplished by both the workshop and the teacher in collaboration. In this holistic dynamic (or constructivist *gestalt*), the teacher is neither Master nor Apprentice, in Lacan's terms, but rather something like a choreographer that moves with the dancers on stage—supplying thereby a trace of what the Director might want to see. The students judge and direct the teacher even as the teacher directs and evaluates the class in a step by step process of self-discovery that is at the same time a manifestation of a Symbolic Order. In this dynamic we are not responding to the Father's No, but rather creating the Law of the Father out of own sinew, as it were.

I want to say here that it is in this area of a Symbolic Order that course-structure, theme-patterning and journaling become important pedagogical devices in my own practice. In short, such devices function like Papertian constructions and Oulipian constraints. In the more 'junior' courses, this structure is presented as a series of 12 or 13 themes, one for each week; in the senior courses, a highly structured form of dream-journaling based on Progoff's widely known Jungian workshop method is a mandatory part of the assignments. Thus the courses may be said to have a depth structure (as Progoff would say) that acts as a set of checks and balances to the emotional and psychological forces released by connected or constructivist teaching in the 'safe place' of the Creative Writing

classroom. At the third year level, progress through this structure is not spelled out programmatically. A sense of 'mystery' is allowed to be present as the students proceed from one weekly theme to the next. At the exit-level, this 'mystery' is revealed through the keeping of a structured dream-journal. In short, students are asked to make a blank journal with specific sections tabbed off, then receive directions on how to fill the sections. Many of the prompts given to the students comprise writing exercises that are written in the journal, almost always in long-hand. The purpose of this theme-patterning and journaling is to bring structure into the very production of personal emotional and psychological creative power. In the "Advanced" course, the journaling is matched with weekly instruction in writing successfully in traditional forms of fiction, drama, and verse. This material is not dealt with, however, in a Master and Apprentice dialectic. In both cases, the course becomes an extended process-meditation (or thought experiment, or Oulipian riff), begun on the first day of a half-semester course and finished on the last day when a final portfolio is submitted for grading.

3. Methodology

Thus what I am saying here amounts to a summary report on many years of experiments conducted in the lab of the Creative Writing classrooms at a regional undergraduate school. My university is located in the (small) urban centre of a large agricultural area, as we like to say, the Palliser Triangle, the Last Last Best West of rugged North American individualism—a mythological bleed over the Montana border is commonplace here. Our student body is made up of a large percentage of farm and small town people, many of them relatively fervent Christians of several denominations, many more of them rural dudes--as opposed to urban cowboys--who often come from families whose grandparents either spoke a language other than English or arrived in Alberta after a north-westwards migration out of the United States. The percentage of more recent immigrants and 'people of color'—not including First Nations students—tends to be relatively low. The students have little urban aggressivity, and are generally hard-working and honest. I have always felt a keen fondness for this demographic, a milieu that has been winsomely captured by its native son Thomas King in his highly structured yet dream-like mythological novel *Green Grass, Running Water* [18]. In this novel, the interplay of the mythological (the Real) and the actions that the four protagonists undergo (the Symbolic), Coyote, a native Trickster figure, playfully manipulates events behind the scenes. We are off the beaten path, certainly, but at the same time we are the avant-garde of our locus, and when we want to write representationally, we represent ourselves. We make no apologies for not being Torontonians, or Parisians, or Calgarians. Thus my students have a unique sophistication and pedigree. At the outset, on the first day of class, I establish at once a recognition of and a distance from the milieu in which we live, which contains everything we need to create or fathom a living cultural poesis, a "new meaning" or "Total Syntax" in Watten's post-structuralist terms. All this is part of what it means for the classroom to be a 'safe place.'

This has never been a conscious thing. I have only realized the signature and echo of this first step after long reflection. I have never been at home in Southern Alberta. For me, what Homer called *oikos*, house and home, is something I probably would not be able to find unless it was somewhere deep in Eastern Europe, perhaps Bucharest or someplace like that. For me, being at home might engender a deeply in-dwelling sense of estrangement that would melt away into some sort of atonement after a long time and many travels. No, the recognition I am invoking here is that of the stranger who sees things differently, but nonetheless does see. This is the moment when the wise old gypsy gives the protagonist what he or she needs to know in order to starting learning what he or she needs to know. It is a moment in which the students can sense that their uniqueness and potential have registered in the perception of the interloper; they can read the echo or trace of that signature in the *gestalt* that then becomes possible. I would imagine that this moment would be the same for the instructor of Creative Writing in the prison system, for example, or among feminists, or children, or businessmen, or people suffering from the entrapment of any variety of addictions or internal trauma. But the point is that nothing will happen without that first step.

After this, a pattern of several connected further stages can be woven into the 13 week structure of a semester course—though a full year course built on these criteria would be epic in comparison. In the scholarly literature devoted to the teaching of Creative Writing, there has been a wide-spread acceptance of 12-step structures not only in the schools but also in the public and on the web. Creative Writing textbooks and online courses are regularly structured to reflect the semester system of colleges and universities. Probably the most successful of these experientally patterning structures is Joseph Campbell's "monomyth." The term was borrowed from James Joyce, who had applied it to the Odyssean canon [19]. Interestingly, though Campbell's "monomyth" is well known in the

academy, it has been much more widely adopted in non-academic courses—in business, for example, and in self-help groups. It also forms the basis of most of the novel-writing software that is available. For Campbell, the monomyth is a "Hero's Journey" as he called it in his fabulously popular book of 1949, his first book as an independent scholar of comparative religion, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. This monomyth was further popularized (some would say vulgarized) by Christopher Vogler in the famous Disney Studios memo [20] and his subsequent popular guide for screenwriters, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* [21].

Another well-known example of a Creative Writing instructor designing a course based on experientally demarcated stages is Julia Cameron's enormously successful series of books, lectures, and workshops that began with 1992 book *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity* [22]. In *The Artist's Way*, there are 12 chapters, one for each of the 12 weeks of her (non-academic and commercial) Creative Writing courses. Julia Cameron conflates the dream or mythical journey structure of Campbell's monomyth with a therapeutic design. This is strategy that has its sisters and brothers in group and individual therapy programs all over North America and Europe—going back at least as far as Robertson Davies's use of it in *The Manticore*, the Governor-General's Award winning novel of 1972, the second of his Deptford Trilogy. It is clear from the thematic patterning of Cameron's chapters that she had struck upon a felicitous correlation between the stages of the Campbellian Hero and the 12-step program of self-help groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, founded as a demythologized or defamiliarized Christian service (the Oxford Group) in 1935 by Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith [23]. Here, one might say that a structure buried in the Real, Campbell's monomyth, successfully attains a therapeutic form in the Symbolic Order of the 12-step program of such groups.

But what is perhaps more interesting is that Cameron's *The Artist's Way* adds yet another layer of patterning to her course, a Buddhist layer that parallels *The Four Noble Truths and The Eight-Fold Path* of traditional Buddhist teachings. With reference to the use of dream-journaling in a writing course mounted for therapeutic purposes, it should perhaps be noted here that the depth-psychological principles that inform Ira Progoff's influential writing or journaling workshops—indeed a pioneering text in this connection—are also Buddhist. Progoff, however, was too much of a social scientist not to defamiliarise this level of meaning. The Jungian depth-images that he believes are therapeutic "tend to refer to practices that depend on doctrines within their own framework of belief. Because of the pluralistic nature of religious experience, especially at this point in history, it has seemed to me to be essential to…not be identified with any particular doctrine." Nonetheless, he borrows demonstrably and heavily from Buddhist tradition because "its most fundamental meaning…has a universalistic sense" [23]. In the terms of Julia Kristeva, Progoff's depth-imagery and "Mantras" are part of the semiotic (and fraught with narcissism and resistance); the patient who achieves a "cure" will have inscribed (through themed or patterned journaling) his or her self in the Law of the Father.

This paper does not have the scope to delineate all of the parallels that can be found in this connection. It will suffice by way of example to look at one step. In Cameron's course, she the chapter title of Week 4 is "Recovering a Sense of Integrity," and her exercises focus on accepting life's challenges and being ready to meet them without fear. In the fourth stage of the hero in the Voglerized version of Campbell's monomyth, the hero meets a wise old man or old woman figure or a mentor who furnishes the hero with knowledge and/or training that will enable the hero to go forward. In other words, the hero receives a gift of empowering integrity. In the fourth step of 12-step programs, the seeker-after-health achieves integrity and discernment though a "fearless moral inventory of ourselves," which in itself creates the conditions necessary for new action in the world, beyond the old confines of the traumatized self (59). Now let us turn to the 4 + 8 structure of the Buddhist way. *The Four Noble Truths* describe a progression from the recognition of *Dukkha* or intolerable, unsustainable suffering, through cause and cure to the further recognition that suffering in life can be made sustainable by following *The Noble Eight-fold Path*. From this point on, in the Buddhist schema, life's challenges will no longer be overwhelming. Furthermore, if this patterning is applied to a course on creative writing, at this stage, Week 4, the student writers may be expected to have accepted a mentor, pulled up their socks through self-searching, and begun living as a writer (free of writers' block) in a way that is wise, ethical, and intellectually astute.

However, there are many other ways in which a course in Creative Writing can be patterned in order to achieve a sense of journeying in a mythical or dreamlike way—from 'having nothing to say' to knowing 'what to say and how:' the journey from semiosis to the Symbolic. The general movement in this conversation is from inchoate

energies to control over language and structure in self-discovery. The sense of journeying may be dream-like, or Real; the sense of finding oneself will amount to one finding a way to fit into (and possibly, politically, even change) the Law of the Father. The exact number of the steps or stages does not really seem to matter. Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces* reconfigures the monomyth into 3, 8, 9, 16, and 17 stages in different contexts. Other schema that might do equally well are the 14 or 15 Stations of the Cross in traditional Catholic ritual, the *Via Dolorosa* or *Way of Sorrows*. Here at the fourth stage of the Passion, Jesus meets his mother having stumbled for the first time, and in the fifth station His burden is eased by Simon of Cyrene. Jesus dies on the cross at station 12, and the remaining stations are devoted to a Christ who has passed over at the point into the afterlife, which is indeed to say, the Symbolic. Of course, the traditional patterning of stations was considerably revised by Pope John Paul II 1991. Another pattern that would serve, conceivably, would be the seven or sometimes nine stages of the Orpheus myth and its ritual mysteries. Yet another could be the seven levels of attainment available to initiates of Mithraism, the religion of late Roman antiquity that competed very well with Christianity until it was driven underground and became the basis of many of the concepts and rituals of Medieval witchcraft. In this connection, one might refer to Paulo Coelho's enormously successful novel *The Alchemist*, the plot of which follows the monomyth precisely and whose author is—officially—a warlock.

Self-transformation through ritual as in the ancient Eleusinian, Orphic, or Mithraic mysteries, or through a devotional formulae such as that exemplified by *Via Dolorosa* of Orthodox and Catholic ritual, or the graduated programs of self-help groups and courses in therapy, for all their variety, nonetheless all seem to have a discernable beginning, middle, and end. Campbell acknowledged this in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* when he collected his stages under three main headings: Departure, Initiation, and Return of the hero. The antiquity of this tripartite structuring can easily be seen by comparing it to the *Dromena* (things acted out), *Deiknymena* or Revelation of the Mystic Grain (things shown), and *Legomena* (things spoken) of the primordially ancient Eleusinian Mysteries. And like the Stations of the Cross and the stages of Campbell's monomyth, here too we find that extra boon, Christ's resurrection, the Elixir, the *Epopteia*, The Holy Light of the Eleusinan Vigil. The point seems to be that a seeker after truth will suffer a departure from his or her ordinary modes of perception through an initiation ritual which engenders a new, or altered, or elevated state of awareness. What seems to matter here is that the dream-journey progresses from a lower awareness to a higher in stages, one step at a time. What I am suggesting is that in this narrative there must also be a transformation of the Real into the Symbolic.

It is, then, in a typology of self-transformation that a Creative Writing course can be mapped against the emotional and psychological progress of the students. This journey begins in that first moment of recognition and distance, moves step by step through an imaginative experience of initiation, and concludes with a vision—however fleeting—of imaginative writing that is or can be—with much practice—wise, ethical, and intellectually refined.

4. Conclusion

If we imagine that Creative Writing is like a dream in which we are aware of a Director deep inside us, and if we imagine that teaching Creative Writing is like writing creatively, then are we not—as surrogate Directors, metaphors for the mentor, the swingers of bull-roarers—always already coming home again after our semester's careful work, where, as in the eighth stanza of Yeats's "Among School Children," "Labour is blossoming or dancing" in a condition wherein we cannot "know the dancer from the dance" [25]. Shoshana Felman has argued that Lacanian pedagogy can render Yeats's collaborative wisdom not only teachable but ethical. She points out that for both Freud and Lacan, working with students was a crucial element in the development of their psychoanalytic theories. She quotes Freud's statement regarding what he sees as the primary concern of education:

> The child must learn to control his instincts. It is impossible to give him liberty to carry out all his impulses without restriction…. Accordingly, education must inhibit, forbid and suppress, and this is abundantly seen in all periods of history. But we have learnt from analysis that precisely this suppression of instincts involves the risk of neurotic illness…. Thus education has to find its way between the Scylla of non-interference and the Charybdis of frustration. An optimum must be discovered which will enable education to achieve the most and damage the least. A moment's reflection tells us that hitherto education has fulfilled its task very badly and has done children great damage. (Felman 71; Freud *SE* 22.149)

Felman demonstrates that Lacan follows Freud in a view of academics as narrow-minded pedagogues who reduce the strong notion of teaching to a "functional apprenticeship" and a "radical vice" [26]. Perhaps it will not be too

much to say that Creative Writing courses—as with all such collaborative recovery initiative—may well benefit from some such dynamic other than the Father and Child, Master and Apprentice binaries that often characterize such teaching.

It may be good for us to set aside our Master's degrees and our Doctorates and hear the music of the way in which elementary classes, self-help groups, men's and feminist groups, and prison groups, develop rapports that are effective. The Symbolic Order beckons. The constructivist classroom (as I understand it) enables the seeing of that beckoning, which not only unlocks enormous creativity but makes it manageable. The passage through such a course in stages creates a sense of journeying towards a wondrous goal, and I imagine that for Creative Writing students as for other groups, that goal will very often be a manifestation of the Symbolic that arises from a local and immediate poesis and the collaborative experience of fellow-travellers. Thus the application of an adaptive but significant structure together with the energies that are built up in collaborative journaling may well be applicable to facilitators or group counselling leaders in a variety of therapeutic and recovery scenarios. The collaborative art-making described above can and does act effectively as a method of controlling the instincts and directing them into stabilizing recovery patterns.

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